

Can excellence be taught? Sophists and their success in fifth-century Athens

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Today if it is money and fame that one is after, then one is better being a pop-star than a teacher. But in fifth-century Greece, teaching could lead to wealth and stardom. The 'sophists' were a particularly high-earning group who were as controversial as they were famous.

Strange though it might seem today, in classical Athens it was possible to make serious money as a teacher. And it was not just the money; some teachers achieved the fame and recognition that we associate with modern-day celebrities. Of course we are not talking about teachers of basic reading and writing, music, and physical education, who were normally of low status and badly paid – or slaves. Rather, we are talking about the group that became known as 'sophists', who offered the closest equivalent to advanced study or higher education in the ancient world. The most famous of them were Protagoras of Abdera in Thrace, Gorgias of Leontini in Sicily, Hippias of Elis in the Peloponnese, and Prodicus from the island of Ceos. They came from different parts of the Greek world, but all spent some time teaching in Athens, because it was the foremost intellectual centre in the second half of the fifth century B.C.

Acquiring a reputation

The term 'sophist' (*sophistês*) initially meant simply 'wise man', but later it took on the derogatory meaning of 'know-it-all' or verbal trickster (compare the English words 'sophistical' or 'sophistry'). How did this happen? There were two reasons for hostility towards the sophists: firstly, rival intellectuals such as Plato, Xenophon, and Isocrates questioned their claims to expertise and worried that they were unscrupulous money-grabbers with nothing truly valuable to 'sell' at all. Secondly, there was a broader mistrust of the change and innovation that came with sophistic thinking: Aristophanes' *Clouds*, written in the last quarter of the fifth century, especially its debate between Right and Wrong (or 'Stronger Argument'

and 'Weaker Argument'), is a great example of the generation gap that was opening up between older traditionalists and the younger followers of the sophists.

In what ways, then, did the sophists interact with the public, and how did they earn admiration and money as well as scorn and ridicule? In Plato's *Protagoras* we find Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus staying in the private residence of one of the richest and most well-connected Athenians, Callias the son of Hipponicus, and staging private discussions in front of an audience that included 'everyone who was anyone' in Athens at the time. There is also evidence for more public sophistic performances: Plato tells us that Hippias used to go to the great festival at Olympia (the Olympic Games), and offer to speak on any of his prepared exhibition topics and answer any questions. The sophists also made display-speeches and looked for students in the agora and in public gymnasia, or even in barber shops (if we believe the comic writers). It seems that some of them set up their own dedicated teaching establishments: in Plato's *Greater Hippias* we hear of a 'school' (*didaskaleion*) where Hippias was to appear as a guest lecturer, and we also have the comic version of the 'thinkery' or 'thinking-shop' (*phrontistêrion*) in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

Money talks

In all these different set-ups, the sophists lectured in exchange for a fee. We cannot be certain about the exact amounts they charged, but the figure of 100 *minae* is mentioned by several sources. It is an astronomical figure: if we consider that the average labourer's wage was one drachma per day, and one *mina* was 100

drachmas, then a sophist's fee was 10,000 times the daily wage! The 100 *minae* would probably buy an entire 'course' of prolonged study with a famous sophist. But it was also possible to benefit from the sophists' teachings on a 'pay as you go' basis. In Plato's *Cratylus* we learn that Prodicus offered two alternative lectures on the same topic, one costing fifty drachmas, the other only one drachma. According to Aristotle, if the audience of the cheap lecture appeared to get bored, Prodicus would insert extracts from the expensive (and presumably more exciting) one.

So why were people prepared to pay the sophists this kind of money? Answering this demands putting them back into the context of the 'Greek enlightenment' or the 'intellectual revolution' of the fifth century in which they taught, following the success of the Persian wars and the growth of Athenian power. It was a period of rapid progress in philosophical ideas, literary creativity, political theory, lawmaking, and the art of public speaking. The sophists were an important driving force behind these developments, and their influence can be seen in the work of authors such as Thucydides and Euripides. What remains from the sophists' own written works (which is not very much) indicates that they were curious and creative thinkers. They questioned traditional beliefs and asked difficult questions about things that many societies take for granted, such as the natural world, laws, religion, and even language (leading to the negative reactions mentioned above). For example, early on in Plato's *Protagoras* we find Hippias conducting a question and answer session on science and astronomy. Later Prodicus gets the chance to display his expertise on language by drawing subtle distinctions in meaning between terms such as 'arguing' and 'wrangling' or 'enjoyment' and 'pleasure'.

The price of education

But perhaps the most important subject taught by the sophists was rhetoric, or the

technique of public speaking. Being skilled in speaking was a major advantage in Greek city-states, and especially in democratic Athens, where political success and power could be gained by persuading the body of citizens in the assembly. Persuasive speech was equally important in the law courts. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the young Hippocrates (Socrates' friend in the *Protagoras*) was so keen to become Protagoras' pupil that he sought to turn up at the great man's residence before dawn! He believed that learning from Protagoras would help him 'become eminent in public life', and was prepared to go into debt for his education by spending his own and his friends' money. This level of enthusiasm by Hippocrates leads Socrates to ask some difficult questions about the precise nature of this highly desirable expertise that Protagoras apparently possesses and is able to pass on to others (for a price).

Socrates' approach here is to compare sophists, doctors, and shipwrights: what expertise do sophists have that can be compared to medicine and shipbuilding? Without a satisfactory answer sophists cannot prove that they deserve their reputation and high fees. Plato's Protagoras responds with the bold claim that he can teach 'good decision making' (*euboulia*) in both private and public life. This is no less than a promise to make men into good citizens, in other words to teach them 'goodness' or 'excellence' (*aretê*). Socrates has doubts because there are no acknowledged experts in what is good or bad for the state (all citizens may voice their opinions equally) and because prominent statesmen have often failed to transmit their excellence to their own sons.

So how can Protagoras show that it is possible to teach excellence, and that he is the man for that job, fully deserving his fee? He first uses the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus, which concludes with Zeus ordering that *all* humans share in conscience/respect and justice (*aidôs* and *dikê*). This being so, there can be no exclusive experts in these matters. The existence of corrective punishment, however, proves that people who are disrespectful or unjust can change and be put on the path towards excellence through training and teaching. Having shown that the teaching of excellence is something that can be achieved, Protagoras explains how this works outside the context of punishment. It is a striking speech, because Protagoras does not refer to any of the important sophistic innovations mentioned above (clever rhetoric, science, challenges to conventional morality and religion). Instead he aligns his teaching with the traditional upbringing that the Greeks have been offering their sons all along:

'dos' and 'don'ts' in early childhood, music and the wisdom of good poets, physical training and public guidance from the laws – all these things are in fact examples of the teaching of excellence!

With this speech Protagoras confronts not only Socrates' challenge about whether excellence is teachable, but also the traditionalist fears about the 'dangers' posed by sophistic education. What he is doing (teaching excellence) is not a dangerous innovation, but was always an integral part of Greek culture – only he does it 'better than others'. Most importantly, Protagoras reminds us that the ability to become a good citizen and make a successful contribution to society does not come just from natural talent or (much less) from social position and family connections. It is a matter of education.

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